

New research developments on Whistlerism (Rouen, 21–22 Jun 24)

Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen, Normandy, France, Jun 21–22, 2024

Deadline: Jan 31, 2024

GILLARD-ESTRADA Anne-Florence

The Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen will host an exhibition entitled "James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903): The Butterfly Effect" as part of the fifth "Impressionist Normandie" festival which will highlight the artistic phenomenon of Whistlerism. On that occasion, an international colloquium will be coorganised in June 2024 by the University of Rouen Normandie and the University of Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne-HICSA.

Organizers:

Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada PhD, Professor, Université de Rouen Normandie, ERIAC

Laura Valette PhD, PhD in Art history

Pierre Wat, PhD, Professor, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Directeur de l'Hicsa

The forthcoming conference intends to shed new light on Whistlerism, the artistic movement which Whistler originated and headed, by looking back at its formation, its history and its wide-ranging impact on literature, poetry, art criticism and art philosophy.

Whistler's students and followers adopted the artist's visual language and helped to spread his work and his artistic theories. All over Europe, artists took up the aesthetic codes Whistler established, and an ever-increasing production of nocturnal landscapes and hieratic portraits bore witness to the widespread admiration for the American painter. The enduring nature and international influence of Whistlerism made it a major artistic phenomenon; it grew out of the trial between Whistler and the critic John Ruskin and offered a new prism for exploring the history of art in the second half of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century. The particularity of this artistic trend is that it emerged during the artist's lifetime and held sway over international contemporary art between 1878 – the starting point of the myth of the artist, marked by the emergence of various adjectives, such as 'Whistlerian' – and the beginnings of the Great War.

The aim of this conference is to review the latest research on Whistlerism – its history, context and historiography –, and to present new perspectives on the subject through a cross-disciplinary approach. We would like to promote new directions in the research on Whistler. To this end, we are seeking contributions from a variety of disciplines, including art history, literature, poetics, aesthetics, cinema studies and visual studies.

We would like to encourage proposals that highlight the following themes:

- Whistlerism in question: mapping Whistler's impact:

Admiration for Whistler was articulated through the adoption of the aesthetic codes which the painter established, such as the use of a restricted colour palette dominated by dark tones or the emphasis on the flatness of the canvas, seen as an arrangement of lines, shapes and colours for purely aesthetic purposes. A number of artists invoked this new paradigm in order to experiment with the latest pictorial innovations and to legitimise their practices by associating themselves with the American master. Indeed, a new generation of artists saw him as a leader. What was, therefore, at stake in claiming to be Whistlerian? What were the ways in which Whistlerism was appropriated? What was the purpose of Whistlerian exemplarity? What were the links and bridges between Whistlerism, Impressionism, Tonalism, Naturalism and Symbolism? In addition to examining this artistic category, we will be looking at the question of cultural and artistic transfers and the various issues involved, not only in Western Europe in the broadest sense, but also in the United States and Great Britain. We also intend to study the reception of Whistler's poetics of incompleteness and the way this was transcribed formally or expressed technically through a materiality characterized by a sketchy rendering, or a smooth, thin pictorial matter compared to a "breath on glass"[1]. The Whistlerian revolution also results from the modernity of the pictorial techniques employed. In recent years, the Kelvin Centre for conservation and cultural heritage research at the University of Glasgow has undertaken a material study of Whistler's works. Taking into account that research, our aim is to study the material history of Whistler's paintings and those of his followers.

- Whistlerism through the prism of art criticism:

The term whistlerism was coined by art critics. It was first used in France in a humorous context by the French engraver and art critic Félix Buhot to introduce the readers to one of the major inspiring figures of the first exhibition of the XXXIII group at the Galerie Georges Petit in 1888. Georges Petit opposed "pissarisme" (after Pissarro) with "whistlérisme", which he defined as a "new school of art which, formed in the shadows, suddenly appears, arrayed in battle, strong, experienced, armed from all sides and emerging fully armed from the... palette of James McNeill Whistler.[2]" When it emerged, the term was associated with numerous adjectives, such as Whistlerian and Whistlerist, which flourished in specialised journals from the 1880s onwards. Paradoxically, during his trial against John Ruskin, Whistler challenged the legitimacy of art critics while craving their support, especially in France. Did Whistlerism encourage the creation of a new discourse in art criticism? Was this discourse influenced by the image of Whistler himself as it was conveyed in the press in particular? Was Whistlerism influenced by his exchanges or even broils with his contemporaries, or by current pamphlets, caricatures, adverts or illustrations representing him as a dandy? Is there such a thing as a Whistler myth? What were the links between Whistler and contemporary art critics? Can we speak of an alliance between the pen and the brush? What was the critical reception of Whistler's work and that of the Whistlerians in Europe, Britain and the United States?

- The dialogue between the arts:

Whistler's art involves cross-references between painting, literature, poetry, art criticism, music, decoration and architecture. In his protean work, Whistler, who was a painter, engraver, water-colourist, decorator and scenographer, never ceased to build bridges between the arts and various mediums, or between countries (the United States, Britain, France). The Peacock Room, which he created for the art collector Frederick Leyland in 1877, was in line with Wagner's ideal of the Gesamtkunstwerk – or the total artwork. During the 1870s, Whistler championed an innovative

style of painting that favoured colour harmony over subject matter. It was during this period that the Nocturnes and Symphonies were produced, which puzzled the public because of their sketchy character and the emphasis on pictorial incompleteness. Whistler's work offers a complex approach to interartistic relations, notably through the allusions to the notion of the autonomy of art, to the musical paradigm and to analogies with Baudelairean and Mallarméan poetics. What were the conditions that encouraged such interactions between all these fields in the second half of the 19th century? What is at stake in a project in which a paradoxical otherness is set as a precondition of its own identity? How are these intermedial dialogues established in the works of Whistler and his followers? What are the artistic and philosophical issues at stake in the Gesamtkunstwerk project which for example generally characterizes the Peacock Room? What synergies united Whistler with his contemporary artists, writers and musicians? These interrogations will perhaps help determine a prosopography of the social, artistic and literary circles frequented by the artist. It will also be fruitful to identify a literary production that responded to Whistler's art.

These themes are neither exhaustive nor exclusive, and each proposal will be examined carefully. The scientific committee will be particularly attentive to the interdisciplinary dimension of the proposals as well as to the latest developments in the research on whistlerism. The papers will be published in the conference proceedings.

We are inviting participants to propose 20-minute presentations in French or English: please submit a one-page abstract with a title and a brief biography with names and affiliation in Word format to Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada (af.gillardestrada@gmail.com) and Laura Valette (valette.laura@gmail.com).

The venue of the conference will be the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen (Normandy).

We encourage proposals from students whose research focuses on Whistler. Costs may be provided for doctoral students.

The conference programme will also feature other activities, including an evening reception at the museum to visit the exhibition.

The deadline to submit proposals is 31 January 2024.

Notification of acceptance by the scientific committee will be sent by February 29 2024.

Reference:

CFP: New research developments on Whistlerism (Rouen, 21-22 Jun 24). In: ArtHist.net, Dec 3, 2023 (accessed Jul 16, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/40718>>.